

AN INTRODUCTION TO TRADITIONAL NUPE DESIGN:
A LIVING FORCE IN CONTEMPORARY
NIGERIAN ART

By

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DEDICATED

TO

MY FAMILY

Nnakogi Ndalusa Ndagiyisa Nnayisa

Nnagunu and Tswako.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	iii
CHAPTER	
I. INTRODUCTION	1
Clay Media and Contemporary Art	6
Traditional Concepts; A Way of Aesthetic Education.	8
Art in Contemporary Africa.	10
The Nupe Ethnic Group of Nigeria.	14
II. ART IN THE HISTORY OF NUPE SOCIETY	18
Gacin or Ecin as an Educational Process	20
III. "ECIN" RIDDLES AND RELATIVE ENGLISH MEANING.	23
IV. SYMBOLIC MEANING OF NUPE DESIGN.	29
Designs and Sign Related to Gacin and Gamaga in Nupe Arts	29
V. CLAY EXPRESSIONISM AND NUPE DESIGN	40
African Religious Symbol Gunuku	46
Kparashoku - Wall - Fence	49
BIBLIOGRAPHY	54

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The goal of this thesis is to discuss Nupe design in relation to contemporary Nigerian art. To achieve this I shall go into the grass-roots of traditional Nupe Art which has its bases in the literature of the Nupe ethnic group. The designs are related to the use of allegories, proverbs or cryptic words.

I intend to relate Nupe designs and the literature as source of subjects in the art of ceramics. The philosophy of contemporary Nigerian artists, in contrast to the Modern Western artist, who is able to specialize in technique and style, is characterized by the union of traditional culture and functions of Art.

Looking closely into traditional Nupe design and its relationship to the Nupe literature gave me insight into creating abstract images, which convey in simple illustrations a depiction of allegories of Nupe's past, present and future.

I have turned to my native land for self-identity and for inspiration after being influenced by a fellow African Artist who after being exposed to western tradition was able to see the rich fertile subject matter in his original society.

One such example is in the person of Oku Ampofo, A Ghanaian sculptor, who in the magazine of the West African Society I. No. 3

"Africana" (Summer 1949) p. 18. (Neo-African Art in the Gold Coast.) was quoted as having said that, "I found in these ancient masterpieces the emotional appeal and satisfaction which western education had failed to cultivate in me. It was as though an African had to go all the way to Europe, "America" to discover himself! This is virtually true of most of us. Very little, if any, of what is real in our own culture is taught in our schools and colleges."¹

Such a thought provoking statement is an eye opener to a lot of Africans when they rediscover the fantastic subject matter often found in traditional African sculpture. Nonetheless, I began admiring this aspect of the use of geometric shapes in various traditional industries such as cloth dyeing, pottery, floor making and in the arts such as masks associated with ceremonial life of various ethnic groups. The application is a way of expression and part of the traditional way of life. The main subject matter of these designs and reliefs, however, is the past and present activities of the people.

At this point, my interest in making art a living force in the society has been strengthened. My aim is to synchronize philosophies and ideas of traditional Nupe society with my ceramic concepts and ideologies of contemporary Nigerian society. The result is to produce forms which will be expressive and aesthetically interesting in both traditional Nigerian and the western society.

¹Marshall Ward Mount. African Art, The Years Since 1920, p. 173.

To achieve these objectives, I treat ceramics in a totally different way from the usual art of pot-making by relating it to the traditional concept of gacin or gamaga, a Nupe word meaning proverb; a wise saying or allegory. This break in tradition can be treated as revolutionary. But to me, I am concerned with mending the lost rich Nupe culture with the contemporary modern Nigerian life style.

Revolution is said to be the most creative force of human inventions; this statement has become the motivating force which encouraged me to struggle to receive inspiration from non-ceramic ideology or material. By using Nupe traditional concepts such as Gacin, Ecin or Gamaga, I have been able to open up a route to self-identity and expression in the art of pottery-making.

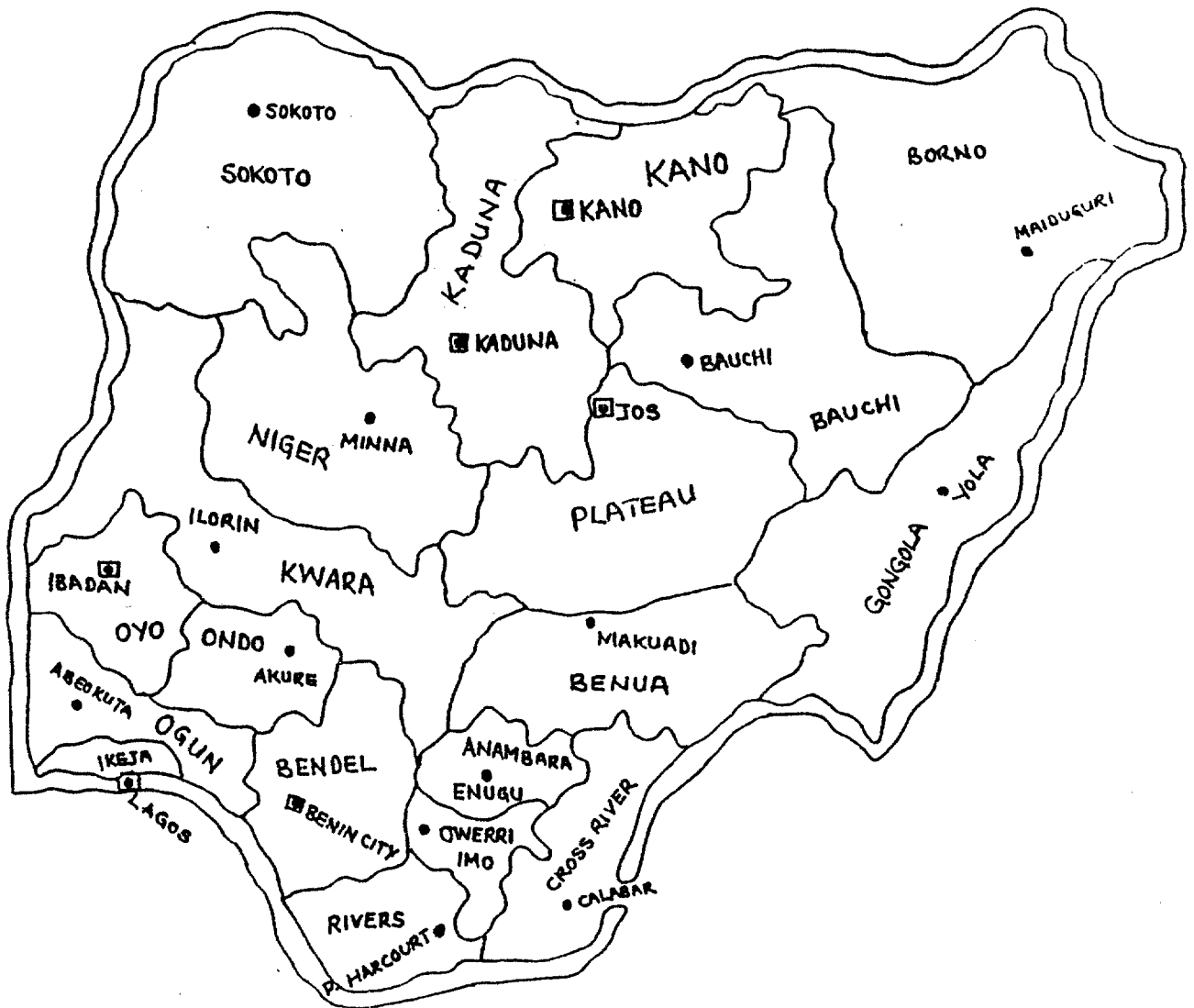
My arrival at the University of Wisconsin-Madison art school enhanced my opinion that the art of pottery production can be diversified. Through a system of cross fertilization of ideas from my professors and fellow students my philosophy for "Art" was greatly influenced. I first began to see these possibilities in art in the words of Daniel P. Biekuyck, which I summarized in his words thus: "Art remains today as a living force in society, being a medium of communication with the spirit world, with the same traditional connotation. It is a constant reminder of the reality and relevance of the myth as well."²

²Daniel Biebuyck (ed.). Tradition and Creativity in Tribal Art, p. 9-23.

I would like to discuss here my involvement and interest in culture promotion to establish art as a living force in society. In 1973, after graduation from the University of Ahmadu Bello Arts School in Zaria, I was employed in the service of the Cultural Division with the former Northwestern State of Nigeria. In 1976, I moved to the newly created state of Niger as a cultural staff-member. During my years of service in the Cultural Division, the objectives of the government in establishing the Cultural Department were clearly stated in the preliminary exercise of Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture, "FESTAC 77."

The aims of the festival were:

1. to insure the revival, resurgence, propagation and promotion of Black and African Culture, Black and African values, and Civilization.
2. to present Black and African culture in its highest and widest conception.
3. to bring to light the diverse contribution of Black and African peoples to the Universal currents of thought and arts,
4. to promote Black and African artist performers and writers, and facilitate their world outlets,
5. to promote better international and inter-racial understanding, and



Map I.
 Showing nineteen states of the
 Federal republic of Nigeria and
 the state capitals.

6. to facilitate a periodic "return to origin" in Africa by Black artists, writers, and performers uprooted to other continents.³

I was sincerely dedicated to achieving my objectives which were in keeping with the FESTAC 77 philosophy.

I am proud to say that Madison's art school has been a unique center for brewing the ideology of self-identity. This has been made possible by the number of various professors I have studied under who themselves are very fine people and sophisticated artists and educators.

Clay Media and Contemporary Art

Clay, the basic material used in ceramic art is a substance which is made readily available by nature. It is found almost everywhere along wet river banks and is the cheapest and most abundant art material in the universe.

A number of ceramicists have described clay in many beautiful ways. Among them Polly Rothenbery, in her book "The Complete book of Ceramic Art 1972" described clay as "a substance that has a certain inherent quality deriving from its uniqueness. Clay has plasticity, or the property of retaining a shape attained by pressure deformation, but when it is fired, it becomes hard and rock like. Working with clay can create a feeling of instant

³Newbreed Magazine, Special Edition FESTAC 77, 1976 Vol. 5 pp. 56-57.

potential wonderful quality of plasticity."⁴

The description of clay which I admire most is that by Paul Rayer in Polly Rothenberg's book. Rayer states that "clay--formless by itself, yet ready to take almost any form demanded of it; abundant and cheap, yet objects to take almost any form demanded of it; abundant and cheap, yet objects of great value may be made from it. After centuries of serving man, it is still capable of providing fresh inspiration. Clay is direct, with no brush to get in the way, Clay must be worked with the hands, pushed, pulled, and squeezed. It is spontaneous and responsive, yet demanding of great skill and technical mastery."⁵

In my personal view of Clay, I can not ignore those essential qualities inherent in the words of these artists. In the light of these definitions, Clay to me becomes a potential medium for self-expression because of its easy manipulation. Clay has become a very suggestive element for motivation and a way of expression to so many people beyond the production of pots or household functional materials. In this exercise, Clay goes beyond that aspect of everyday living, sitting rooms, museums and curiosity object, to a language of expression and a traditional way of life.

⁴Polly Rothenberg (ed). The Complete Book of Ceramic Art. Section 1, p. 1.

⁵Polly Rothenberg, Section 1, p. 1.

Traditional Concepts; A Way of Aesthetic Education

Why is the use of traditional concepts of Nupe designs important for aesthetic expression? Art is a way of life; proper motivation and introduction to art can create a society of interested art consumers; for example, advocates of aesthetic education.

Edmund Burke Feldman stated in his Becoming Human Through Art, that the success of contemporary art is based on these pros and cons; resulting from a strange irony that Art seems less relevant to life than before it became so popular, ...because we have managed to remove art to the outer periphery of our lives and imaginations. He expressed ways in which contemporary art is less relevant to society to day, such as art becoming -

"a. A commodity with a market value--

"Worth" ----

- b. emphasis on originality - Culture devoted to discovering, nurturing and rewarding the persons who are innovators.
- c. Style - influence of stylistic succession ---identified with scientific and technological progress. (Rembrandt, pop, etc.
- d. Cultish approach to art --- we build a cult of personality around outstanding performers, i.e. Picasso is the great example, etc.----"⁶

⁶Edmund Burke Feldman. Becoming Human Through Art.
p. 16-22-46.

Instead Feldman believes that art is an effective agent in human behavior. He advocates an educational objective, in which Art teachers can try to enlarge their pupil's concept of Art so that they can help bring about its integration, naturally and officially. They must learn to perceive form and meaning not only in pictures but also in every aspect of personal and social life. In this exercise, I follow Feldman's suggestion of the interaction by art and society using Nupe literature as a bases for inspiration in the teaching and execution of ceramics. My aim is to deal with creativity using familiar traditional concepts among the Nupes.

My study is directed more closely to non-western societies, societies whose values and traditional concepts have strong mythological backgrounds. When one examines avenues of cultural comparison of western and non-western societies, it is easy to see diverse influences on values, perception and cognitive structures. Art education through aesthetic education can be a medium for its remedy.

People from non-western, non-English speaking, societies like myself often find that linguistic problems and differences are factors of cross-cultural comprehension. We have to translate ideas from our native languages into English before dealing with the problems and solution of the English-speaking western society.

Having been aware of this fact, I realized that the use of concepts familiar to a group of people for example the Nupes can

be a prime factor for motivation and insight into art, and into creative performance. In order to derive this aspiring inspiration for art execution, the use of traditional concept familiar to the society can be a vital force.

By using traditional Nupe design as a guide to arousing cultural sensitivity, I have been able to open up a road map for aesthetic education. This will help children who are familiar with gacin and gamaga enlarge their creative power as intelligent viewers, perceptive critics and sensitive interpreters of the Arts.

Art in Contemporary Africa

Art is a living force among Africans today. In examining the course of Art in Africa for the second half of the twentieth century, Frank Willett, in his book African Art Today discussed the period of what can be referred to as the "Artistic renaissance for Africa."⁷

In their review, the Northern half of Nigeria which has adopted Islamic culture as a traditional way of life showed some Islamic influence on the art. The Islamic culture discourages figurative art.

An exception to the tradition of non-figurative art exists among the Nupe who also live within Northern Nigeria that "representational forms, ornamental and sculpture of great beauty were found."

⁷Frank Willett. African Art Today. p. 170-181.

Portugese traders and Christian Missionaries along the west Atlantic Coast of African in the 15th century influenced development of a mixture of traditional figurative art with Christian imagery such as crucifixies.

Then came the influence and impact of colonialism on the Art and people of Africa. This was demonstrated by the colonizers. In Congo the Portugese used the Congolist Fetish Art of Konde for a general belief taught in the Christian faith.

The French attempted to make their African subjects into Frenchmen. Their African subjects were taught to favour European Art standards as the pinnacle to which African artists should aspire.

In Nigeria Lord Lugard's British policy of indirect rule lead to the establishment of Nigerian Craft centres, such as Father Kevin Carroll School which lead to contemporary Nigerian traditional artists like Bamidele and Lamidi's sculptural developments. The result: Bamedele became the Cultish carver of the Ogboni house in Ekiti, while Lamidi became best known for his Dye-Ekiti carvers scenes from traditional Yoruba and Bible. The visual presentation of Biblical stories among traditional Yorubas, and their art led to such works as Osifo's crucifixion which were fashioned in the Benin plaque style.

Notwithstanding these artist works in the traditional style making art a way of life of their society. Other African artists began to work in the western style as western trained artist, for

example, Ben Enwonwu of Nigeria, African writers and critics such as Cyprian Ekwensi saw the works of Ben Enwonwn on the Apostolic church door in Lagos as African in subject but not in style. Ben Enwonwn was not working for an African public. Ekwensi advocated for western trained African artist to turn more to traditional ancestors Art.

This statement produced an attempt to return to traditional style leading to art works we call airport art: smooth and shiny pieces to harmonize with European sitting-room furniture. Experimentalists in the late 60s used variety of media. For example, the Mbari-Mbayo; Twins Seven Seven, used the literary approach of traditional Folk-Tales. Another example is that of Jimoh Buraimoh who threaded beads on cloth using epoxy resin adhesives to mount. Also Susanne and Wenger at Oshogbo working with resist adire - goddess of Oshogbo (Oshun river) - in Cement Sculpture.

The place of Art in changing contemporary African society cannot be over emphasized. The traditional element form and designs are seen in use on Architecture, Embroidery, dress hair style etc. serving the need of the community. This then, is giving the western trained African Artist room to experience Modern contemporary Art. The art of a culture that institutionalized change. Therefore the contemporary African Artist has the whole world from which to draw ideas.

The Nupe Ethnic Group of Nigeria

My thesis is that harmonizing traditional Nupe style with contemporary western style provides a ground for developing aesthetic education among the Nupes.

Who are the Nupe people? The Nupes are one of the many different ethnic groups living along the River Niger. They constitute one of the single largest linguistic groups in the Niger states of Nigeria. The Nupes are mainly agriculturists (small scale farmers). They live in segmented large and small cities throughout the Niger State.

Many Nupes are famous craftsmen and well known for their natural skills in arts and crafts. The most remarkable of all these skills, the historical technique of glass-blowing, is still known only to a group of families in Bida Town. Although Nupes are exceptionally famous for their glassbeads, bangles, brasswork and bead polishing (using natural stones), they are also very well known for the traditional arts and crafts which include pottery-making, mat-making, woodwork, embroidery, dyeing, etc. Because of their remarkable skills, Nupes have been able to successfully incorporate their artwork into thriving marketable cottage industries.

My mother is a highly skilled artist. She used a lot of simple design elements in weaving clothes. The traditional Nupe loom which she uses is very technically complex. To achieve these elaborate designs, embroidery of different design elements is processed directly on to the clothes. What distinguishes the traditional

Nupe clothes from others in Nigeria is the use of colour. The Nupes have a taste for brilliant colour. Each cloth is made up of brilliant lines of beautifully colored threads. On the surface of the thread-weaving technique is lead the design thread using elements of various traditional concepts for motif.

Each craftsman in the art of dyeing, embroidery and weaving must use sufficient decoration for the trade to flourish among the Nupes. Also the designs must be adequately used. Among the Nupes everyone in the community is expected to know a craft well enough to make a living. Therefore in order to make one's art or craft marketable, each designer must demonstrate a sense of creativity. The ability of appealing patterns proficiently in one's art or craft is judged by the use of design elements an artist can handle. The more elaborate the design the more its worth. Therefore the status of a person in the society is shown in the type of design the clothes individuals wear.

In this thesis I am developing a common ground for inter-relationship of traditional Nupe design with contemporary ideology of western art. I am utilizing the ideas of simplification of objects in traditional Nupe designs, an ideology which is said to have infringe upon "artistic freedom". This idea I feel will be a fundamental urge or motivating factor to effective art education in Nupe schools in Nigeria.

The use of gacin and ecin suggest to me that significant art ideologies can be gotten from the proper use of Nupe literature.

Indeed such literature can require utilitarian roots and a specific set of aspirations and expectations regarding the optimum conditions and parameters of art-productions.

Considering the dimension my art works have followed precisely, I have worked to integrate traditional ideologies from Nupe literature and designs to serve a social function. When the reader studies my works and gets to understand the symbolic representation, each work will show a "reflect, a facet of man which even in periods of adversity and transition find expression in exquisite forms. -- the 'arts' not only derive meaning from life, but give intensified meaning to human existence." Neprude also noted that taking the main instrument from "biological and social roots"⁸ such as evident in gacin and gamaga in my culture, will improve that fact of man which is not stimulus bound, but a seeker, an adapter and a creator, a fact which forms a common bond with all other human's regardless of their ability, status, or predicament. To this end, works using ideas related to the society will open up the secrets of aesthetic enjoyment and the freedom of self expression. This fact relates to social and functional aspect of Art.

In this thesis every art work is related to a particular ideology in the Nupe literature. I think the title of each work will make a Nupe person feel at home with my works. And for a non-Nupe

⁸Ronald W. Neperud. The Creative Necessity. p. 2-10.

examining the forms and literature the Art forms will give an insight into the rich Nupe Culture.

CHAPTER II

ART IN THE HISTORY OF NUPE SOCIETY

Islamic colonization and christian Evangelization have had a strong anti art influence because Islamic religion forbade figurative representation, and Christian Missionaries regarded all art objects, which were centered around personification, as "heathen art objects." These labels were placed on art works regardless of their significant value to the traditional culture or socialization of the preliterate society.

How does art function in the socialization process of these preliterate traditions? Art was a major goal for education. A good artist was one who "learned to be a good conserver of the past through oral tradition, folktales, stories, proverbs and wise sayings. Education then was a living force in the traditional culture of these societies, and pragmatic problem solving was the life style."¹ Socialization therefore was based on contextualized reasoning rather than the western world's cognitive perception of conceptual reasoning as related to the preliterate society.

Among the Nupes, gacin or gamaga as proverb or allegory is used in an abstract perspective. Each ideology is built on a physical

¹Vandra Masemann. Anthropology and Education. pp. 1-5, 1977.

context or woven verbally around some symbolic configuration. In a sense, gacin or gamaga is a form of conceptual thinking in pictorial or symbolic phrases.

Art among the Nupes serves purely practical and aesthetic functions. The elders, the parents, and those of other age groups see the correct interpretation of gacin or gamaga, or the ability to construct one of these means of expression and language of thought, as highly creative and therefore attribute it to the mystical power of the intellectuals.

The oral expressions involved in the usage of gacin or gamaga are a reflection of the Nupe society. Social events, activities, and discussion are centered on the reading of these symbolic messages. Therefore socialization through the use of gacin or gamaga can be direct because solutions to social problems are generally given in folktales, dreams and proverbs. An example for the use of gamaga in dealing with a social problem can be, for instance, a child falling victim to a bully and constantly going home crying. The best advice to him will be a word of caution contained in one of the gacin or Gamagazi 'proverbs'. An example can be "Dan dan mu dan kanadza". A tun dzakangi eje gi na a tun ekpa ce a." Which means, "Children are begged to eat and not advised to play". The first part of this proverb interpretation is based on its melodious sound which implies a "I don't care attitude." The abstracted terminology is just to warn the child to "be cautious in choosing playmates and not to blame anyone for his falling a victim." The words are abstracted in

themselves and cannot be translated into any other language. The literal meaning is to inflict pain symbolically through words. Children are therefore required to be aware of the pilot of the proverbs in a figurative sense.

The Nupes have a sincere interest in art, when used in conjunction with oral and written literature. Since their language is composed of many symbolic terminologies, the Nupes regard the art of good vocabulary expression as an aspect of artistic talent. Gacin a traditional form of literature used by the Nupe people, is a concept which can also be used to perceive a symbolic connotation when applied or implied in an abstract setting. When used in the traditional context it can be very picturesque. This image makes the gacin concept instrumental to the Nupe artist because it can be transformed symbolically to form a shape or an object.

Gacin or Ecin Riddle as an Educational Process

Actually, ecin is a riddle in Nupe oral literature. Ecin, gacin and gamaga in this sense connote proverbial riddles. It can be said that it is a reciprocal bond between the arts and the socialization process of the community. Every ecin or gacin is to be "readable" and "understandable" to the public, much like the artist who has a message, a concept, or a belief to convey through his work of art. Ecin can be equated to Leach's belief that an institution is "a faculty for making and understanding ambiguous statements."²

²E. R. Leach. "Aesthetics" The Institutions of Primitive Society. 1954, p. 25-38.

In the Nupe Society and various other African cultures, many facets of the symbolic system find expression in oral literature, song, dance, gesture, and dramatic performances rather than art forms. To me this face of symbolic expression that I want to incorporate in my ceramic art is a potential medium of self-expression.

The expression by Mountford helps summarize my ideology as follows: "Each work of art is therefore the expression not merely of individual experiences, sensations and values, but also of the influences and attitudes of the culture concerned. The message of a work thus expresses cultural as well as personal attributes."³

The use of gacin or ecin in the Nupe Language as emphasis or expression is a "living force" in the culture. Although one may not be familiar with the ultimate meaning of each allegory or proverb, the riddles are understood to form visual images in the minds of the people. Such visualization can and does provide inspiration for self-expression.

Raymond Firth discussed the relationship of artists in primitive societies with their public. He realized that the artist was not divorced from the society. The role of the artist was that which shared values and concepts in highly esoteric contexts of initiations with closed association to the social life of the

³Charles Mountford. The Artist in Tribal Society. (ed.) M. W. Smith, 1961.

society. So that the artist was moved to study and understand his public in others to convey in forms the need and aspiration of his client. Although the artist may sometimes not be with the ultimate meaning and destination of his products, his knowledge of symbolism in each form is very necessary. I have found among the Nupe society that gacin or gamaga serves a function in the Arts. I have also seen that a number of designs in Nupe art derive meaning in the literature. Next I shall examine some of the specific meanings of ecin or gacin as a basis of traditional Nupe art.

CHAPTER III

ECIN RIDDLES AND RELATIVE ENGLISH MEANING

The following ecin examples are used both for educational as well as for entertainment purposes. Each ecin or gacin riddle will be written in both Nupe and English interpretation with the aim of translating its literal meaning in Nupe. Each possess a question and requires a direct physical answer.

The following are ten examples of Ecinzi

1. Nupe

Nuwon fi shin yaba o, Yaba ma ewo gba.

Ke u yi o?

Eze: Gintara.

English translation: There is plenty of water at the base of banana plant, but it is thirsty.

What is it?

Answer: Tongue.

2. Nupe:

Gbarufu kpokporogi gi eje ke ya etsu.

Ke u yi o?

Eze: Dinni.

English translation: A dwarf has right to dine before a king.

What is it?

Answer: Fly.

3. Nupe:

Koci Kpiakpiariagi sun eko danbo-danbo.

Ke u yi o?

Eze: Nyantsugi.

English translation: A small sheanut tree with very fresh fruits.

What is it?

Answer: A girl (attained age of puberty).

4. Nupe:

Eba wara dazan to yi to yeshi.

Ke u yi o?

Eze: Sangi Nuwon jeci.

English translation: A tiny pole winding its way night and day.

What is it?

Answer: River or stream.

5. Nupe:

Nawu elo na, da won u be.

Ke u yi o?

Eze: Ekpa.

English translation: That is smoke going, go and catch it.

What is it?

Answer: Arrow.

6. Nupe:

Nda mi de cigban ndoci na e cin fini zi

Katamba yi bo a nan.

Ke u yi o?

Eze: Yegi Nyizagi mi.

English translation: My father has a plant that does not shed leaves in our compound.

What is it?

Answer: My sister/my father's daughter.

7. Nupe:

Bisan nini suna ma yize.

Ke u yi o?

Eze: Etswa.

English translation: A single stalk of grass lights the whole world at night.

What is it?

Answer: Moon.

8. Nupe:

Mi lo lati lati ga gwa wu mi.

Ke u yi o?

Eze: Rogo.

English translation: I went to my farm and my farm was showing me its fingers. (curse gesture)

What is it?

Answer: Cassava leaf.

9. Nupe:

Mi fe dazan lo, yeko ci a sa guba mi a

da u gubaba.

Ke u yi o?

Eze: Tsanka.

English translation: I was walking along the road, and the road split into two and I followed both at the same time.

What am I?

Answer: A pair of pants or trousers.

10. Nupe:

Bagi kpoporogi fan ewo ke ya etsu.

Ke u yi o?

Eze: Ekin.

English translation: A dwarf that wears the gown before the king.

What am I?

Answer: Needle.

Now I will give some examples of gacin or gamaga. Unlike ecin which possess a question and requires a direct answer, gacin or gamaga is more philosophical. Gacin translated into English mean's "word of puzzle". While the English translation of gamaga would be, "word of sweet perplexity." Thus, we can say that both gacin and gamaga are acceptable as the English word allegory or proverb.

What differentiates gacin or gamaga from allegory or proverb

is the use of prefix before the actual message. In Nupe society the proper usage of the prefix is as important as the allegory or proverb. The prefix is made up of melodious abstracted concepts which give a contextualized notion behind the allegory or proverb so that, even without saying that whole sentence the prefix can stand on its own. In conversations, the prefix is usually used as a figure of speech and the sentence is totally ignored. Or at times the partner in the conversation is expected to complete the sentence.

The following are examples of some prefixes used in gacin or gamaga. I will attempt to explain the meaning of each prefix as implied by the Nupe culture. I will not attempt to translate any gacin/gamaga in these paragraphs. This part of gacin or gamaga is a form of inspiration to me because the prefix is such a functional grammar that one can easily make up a pictorial image in the mind once he understands the ideology.

1. Agba-fa-gba-dulia nafa kara: an exclamation to imply incredible or extraordinary occurrence.
2. A sha-sha-sha eza labari
prefix to suggest that a person is a talkative liar or talks without substance.
3. Dangodi - Cigba be ekanyi
a prefix which suggests toughness, severity or uncompromising determination.

4. Mi shishishi, efa lo mi be
to imply meeting fortune, good luck, prosperity
5. Nyakan-nyakan nya a nyi
to imply exuberant, shining brightly
6. Tubo-kpebo, wuti wuti, Sokogunci
gba mi cinni
suggests a warning, a dead end, or no solution.
7. Tswa eye tswa eye ga yi chigbe eyeo.
to suggest a warning, be very cautious.
8. Ban-ba na wotu
to suggest facing facts with boldness
9. Tsaku tsaku bente chigban
to imply difficulty or problems.
10. e'ye lelekule, e'ye lelekule, ga kulele bele mi ma.
a prefix to imply falsehood, don't pollute, corrupt, or
gossip contiguity.
11. fakafiki makiri kandu
to imply a lobbyist or double face.

In conclusion, it is possible to apply the use of gacin and gamaga to my ceramic art when keeping in mind that the main idea is to create an abstract image from a specific subject matter in order to allow the viewer to choose his own plot construction, or to draw his own conclusion.

CHAPTER IV

SYMBOLIC MEANING OF NUPE DESIGN

Designs and sign related to Gacin and Gamaga in Nupe Arts

Gacin and gamaga in the functionalist school of Nupe societies have brought artists and craftsmen to a common ground.

They repeatedly use symbolic designs or signs in most decorative patterns. These designs are used in documenting the life style of the society and are throughout the literature. A traditional woven cloth meant for a bridegroom to commemorate his wedding, Figure I, illustrates the use of gacin and gamaga as represented in the symbolic patterns. The artist uses images and physical things surrounding his natural environment. These elements found on the clothes are in pictorial forms. Each of such designs or signs is to convey a message in the symbolic or figurative sense. A careful study of these designs proves that they are related to the use of gacin and gamaga.

A typical example of such proverbs "gacin or gamaga" and its symbolic sign are as follows:

Gacin Nupe: - Yize a se yize gbanbga -

Egi e shi dzo ya nna o.

English translation:

The world has become the world of ducks,
the children lead their mother.

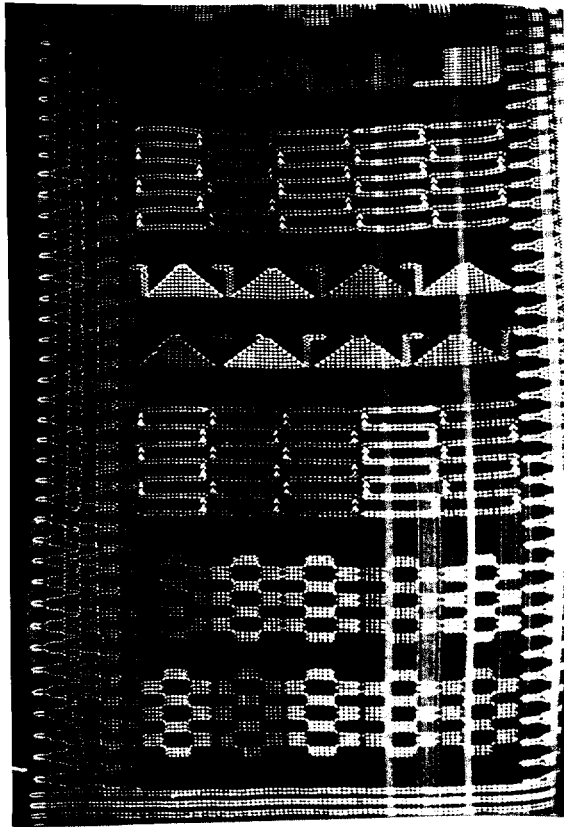


Figure 1

Edekpa ba yawo
A Nupe Bridegroom Cloth.
Woven on traditional women's loom

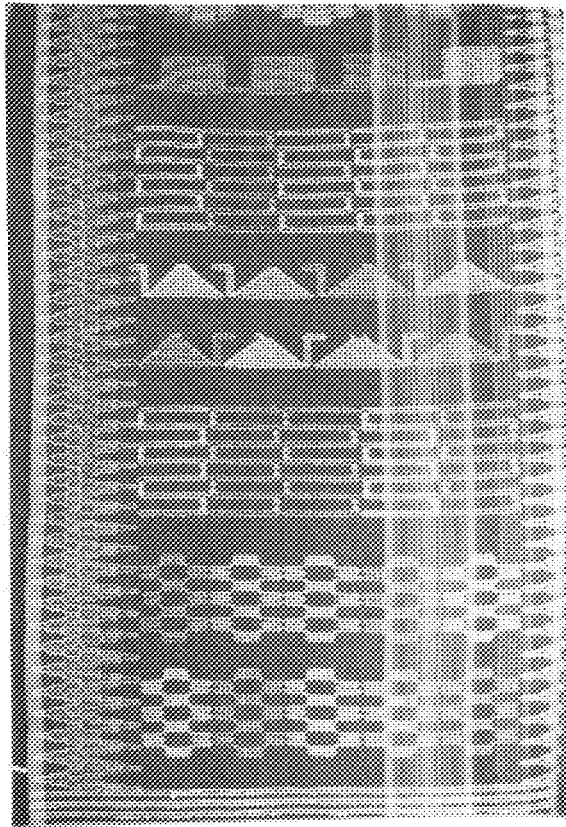
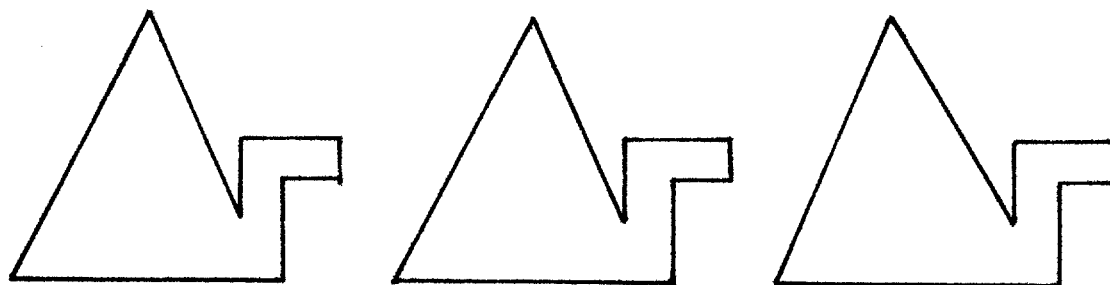


Figure 1

Edekpa ba yawo
A Nupe Bridegroom Cloth.
Woven on traditional women's loom

Illustrated on the cloth thus: -



i Ducks

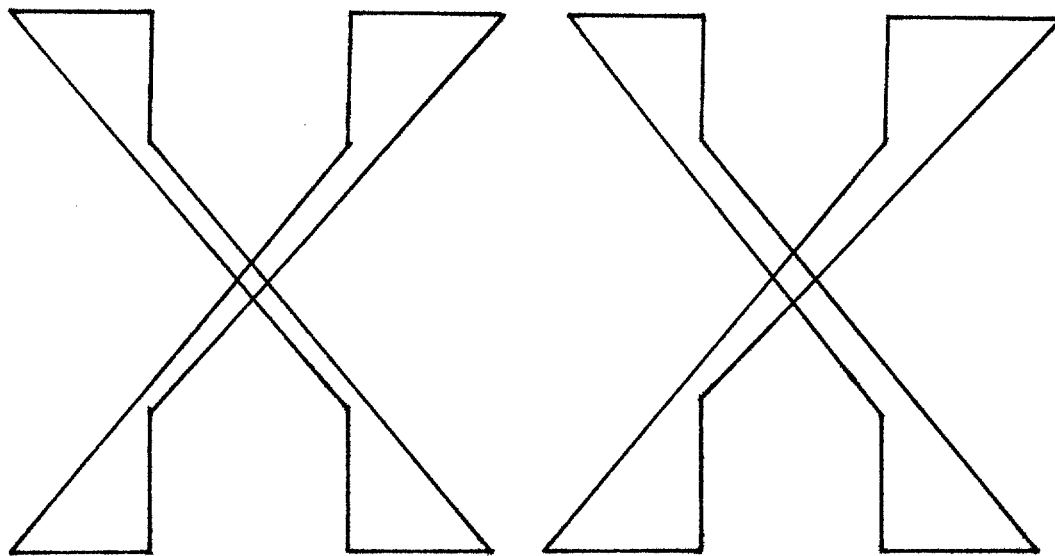
Example II is based on the design of the world; an object which represents the same sign of good luck. It is a symmetrical shape which signifies a revolving disc, which is made from snail shell: The design goes with this gacin:

Nupe: Yize Kolo bo di, yize e lo na,
yize e zi o na.

English translation:

The world transforms itself in many ways, one face for a while than the other. She deals with the past, present and future - revolving people and object through time.

This design is illustrated thus:



ii Sign of Good Luck

The above gacin is not based on the western concept of a round world spinning on its axis, but the connotation of the gacin is to make the user derive the hardship of life or survival. Here the gacin can be seen as a link between the arts, science and technology, in a more precise term mythology of the Nupes. The whole idea is built around the chameleon. An animal with mythical powers centered around its protective coloration.

Here are few other examples of designs found on the same cloth. These are symbols embellished with various mythical powers because of what they represent, or magical elements they possess. An example is this of a 'Geama' Chameleon, Figure 2.



Figure 2

A Nupe Bridegroom cloth showing various design element with magical powers.

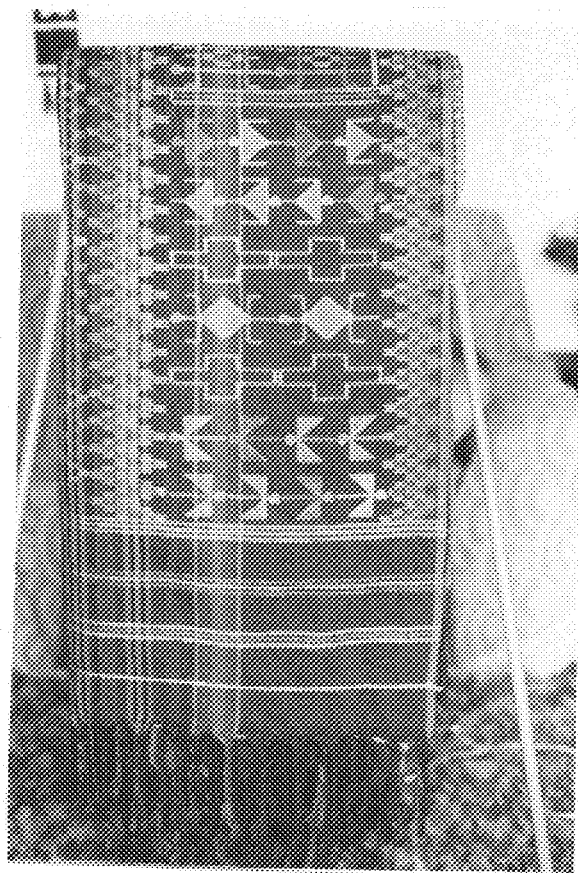
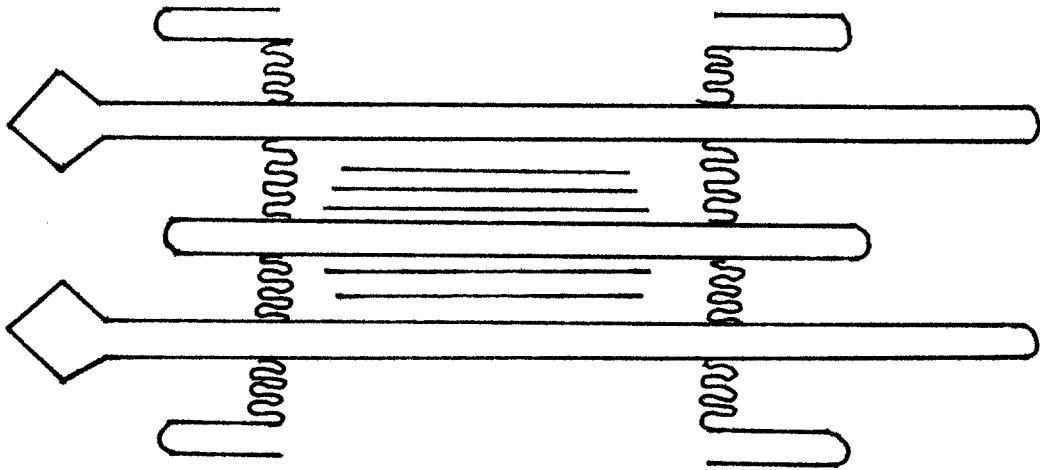


Figure 2

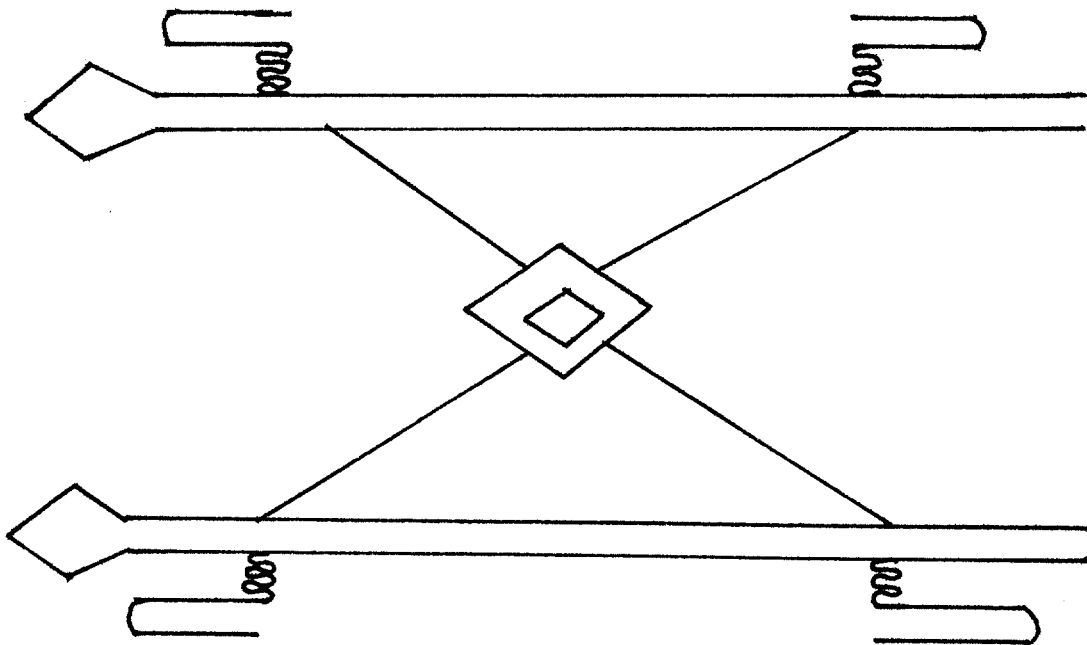
A Nupe Bridegroom cloth showing various design element with magical powers.



iii chameleon

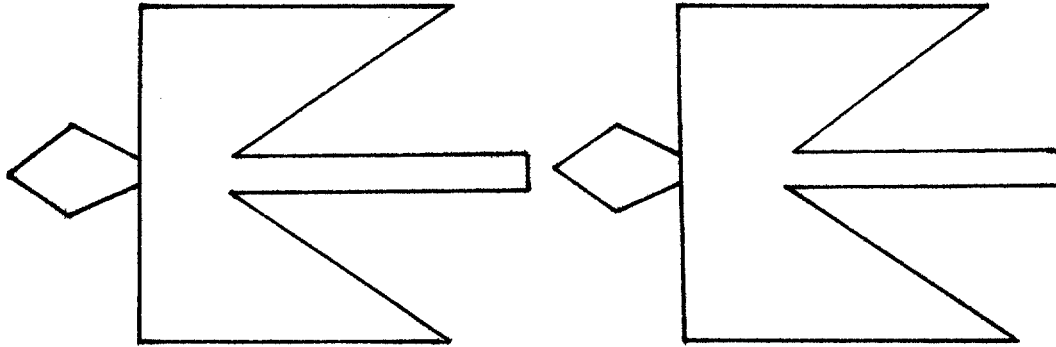
The presence of this sign on any object gives it the power of protection against any evil.

iv - The Tortoise future is found in a number of folktales. Depicted always as cunning creature, and when applied as a sign on various object it is empowered with wisdom.



iv Tortoise

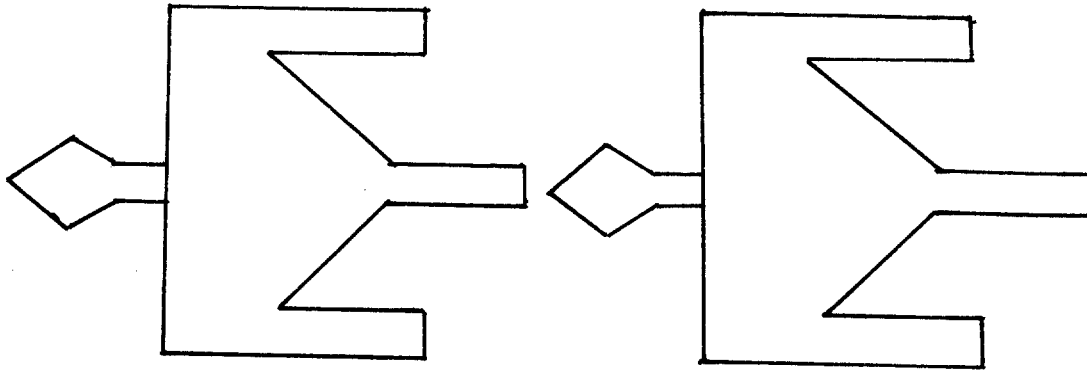
There are some signs associated with Nature and existence of life. For example, the Butterfly Nnapapagi



v butterfly

The butterfly is a creature associated with the elements of fertility. The reason is that very beautiful butterflies are seen preceding the rainy season. When they begin to appear on the farms, the farmers know the land is moist enough to plough. Children are made to believe that butterflies are messengers and carriers of fortune and good luck. In order to protect these insects, children are told to make a wish anytime they see a butterfly. When the insect flies away it will in return reward the child with riches, sound health, and happiness.

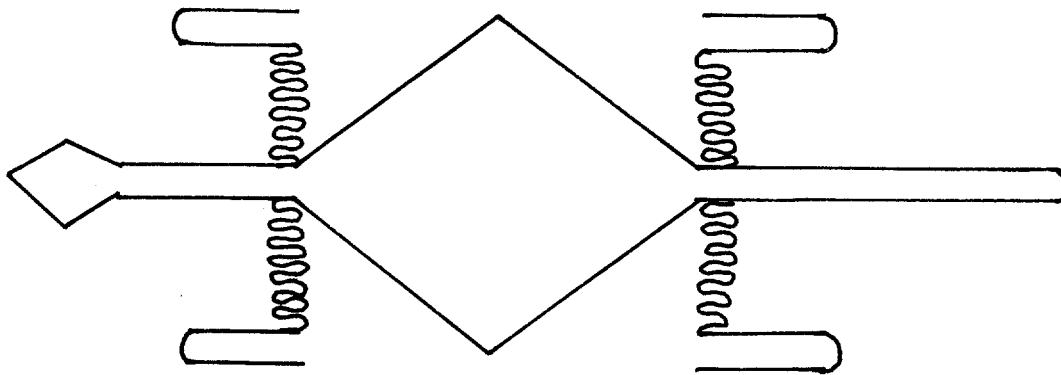
vi. Birds "Elugi" is referred to as a creature with tough character. An animal that cannot be eaten without picking off the feathers. Their depiction on objects symbolizes freedom, an escape from being trapped. A lot of gacin or gamagazi with birds signify safety.



vi Birds

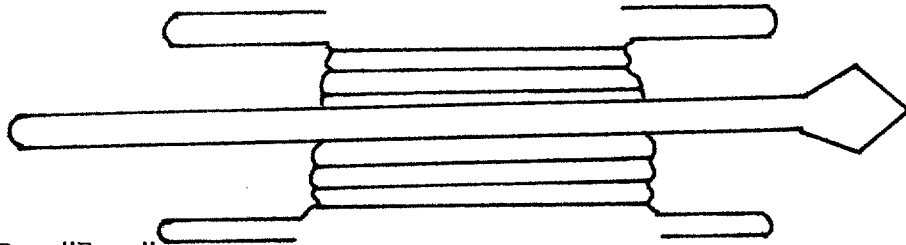
vii. The Lizard "Gbara" This reptile lives in Roof tops of houses like a domesticated animal, although it is not tamed and liked by the people. Yet, it co-exists with man.

Therefore, Lizards find themselves in Nupe gacin and gamaga Proverbs. Certain behaviour of the fully grown male lizard is seen as predicting fire, death, or other forms of disaster or epidemic.



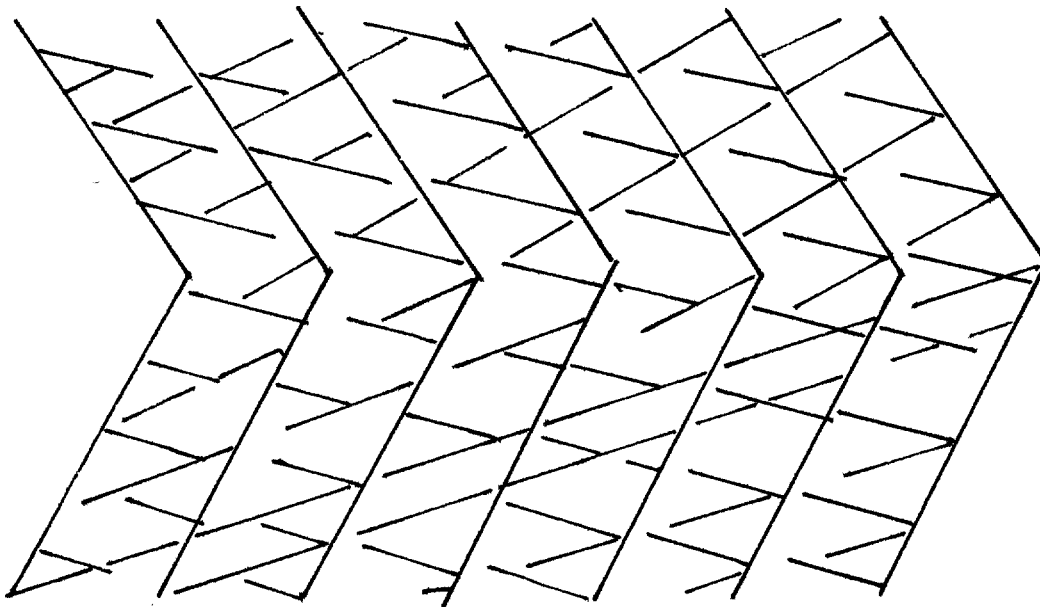
vii Lizard

viii. This is followed by another reptile which is denied domestication as the Lizard and classified as a pest, "a thief and destroyer." The use of rat as signs for design or in gacin or gamaga is to connote selfishness. This sign on objects implies protection against sluggishness.



viii Rat "Etsu"

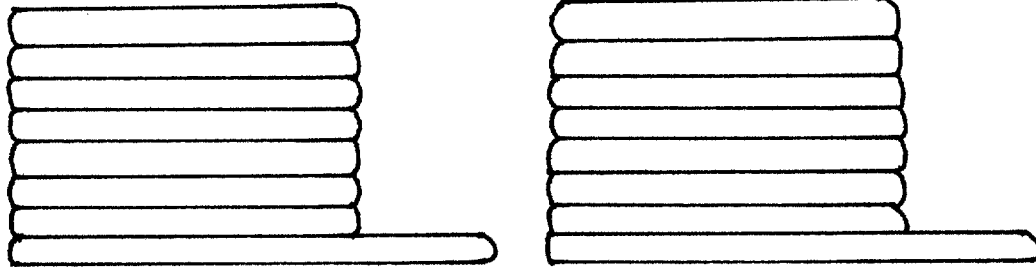
Other elements that find themselves in gacin and gamaga and are commonly found in designs are the following examples. Objects used for human comfort. i.e.



ix Mat "Zongun"

In Nupe language the word "fa", to wrap up or to fold a mat, means the same as ease or comfort. When the mat is rolled up, it connotes folding one's fortune or blocking one's future. Therefore we have proverbs gacin or gamagazi which associate the unfolding of one's future in the hands of God. The sign implies a prayer or requesting God to unfold or ease ones problems and difficulties.

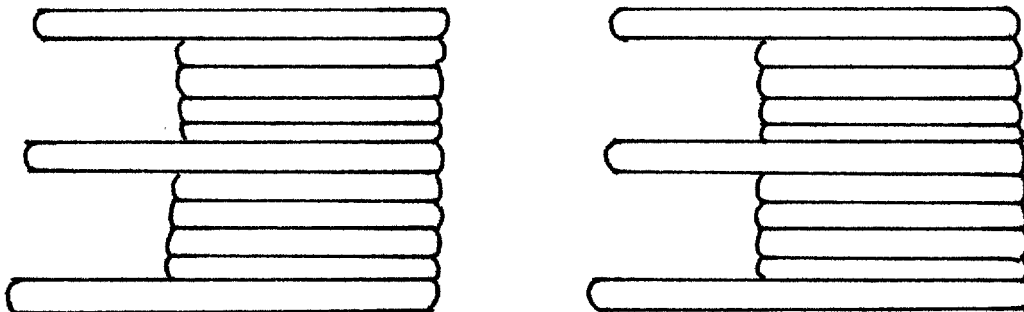
x. The Fan - Tswafengi is similar in meaning in usage as the Mat. It implies personal comfort in a climate where the weather is always hot. So we have fans in a lot of decorations.



x. Fan Tswafengi

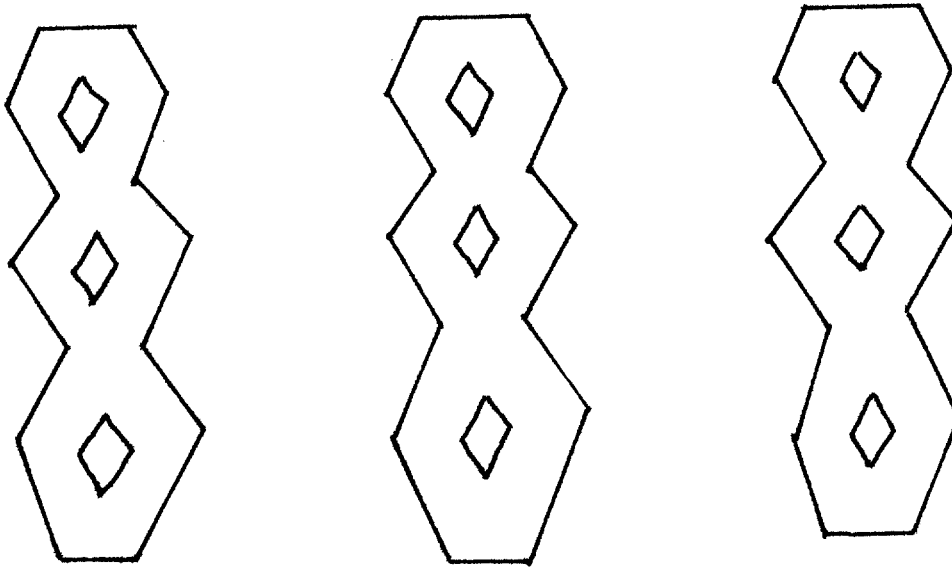
xi. The Comb Tishegi

This sign implies the English proverbs which stress that behind every successful man is a woman. This sign on a man's cloth suggest that he is surrounded with beauty because tidy hair requires a comb, and it is only women who grow long hair among the Nupes.



xi The comb Tishegi

xii. Then we have storage pots - Pots stacked together for economic reasons. The number and size of pots depicts one's wealth and riches. So we find them repeatedly on decorations.



xii Storage pots

The above Nupe design elements as seen in Figure 1 and 2, show the relationship of the Artist with the society. We see how important it is for the traditional artist to use correct designs, if the commodity is to be marketable or accepted for its function. The artist has to be aware of who or what statement should appear in his representation. Each art work is therefore done with care.

In the next chapter I shall try to relate developments and creations of contemporary traditional Nigerian Artists and the society.

Also I shall like to show how my art work is drawing substance from ideas of abstraction as seen in traditional Nupe designs.

CHAPTER V

CLAY EXPRESSIONISM AND NUPE DESIGN

When the idea of using traditional Nupe designs came to me, I began to experiment with representational figurative forms. However, this representational work has little meaning for me; it soon became boring. I was then moved to seek shelter in my culture, to explore the traditional meanings existing in Nupe literature. I got this cultural instinct from examining the philosophies of traditional Nupe artists.

Their works were based on abstracted representation of images. The traditional artist was interested in idealization. Every design in each material or object served an important role in the society. Each abstracted design symbolizes concepts in the Nupe literature. This is a method of documentation or language of expression relating activities, events, and happening to objects and materials in the society.

As I mentioned earlier, the more elaborate the color and design on an object the more important the class or status of the owner. This class distinction was evident in designs and was used to specify the insignia of chief and rulers. Through this method, designs of a particular ruler in history can be studied and translated to recreate the personality one might associate with the ruler.



Figure 3

United Federal Republic of Nigeria. Design on shirt.

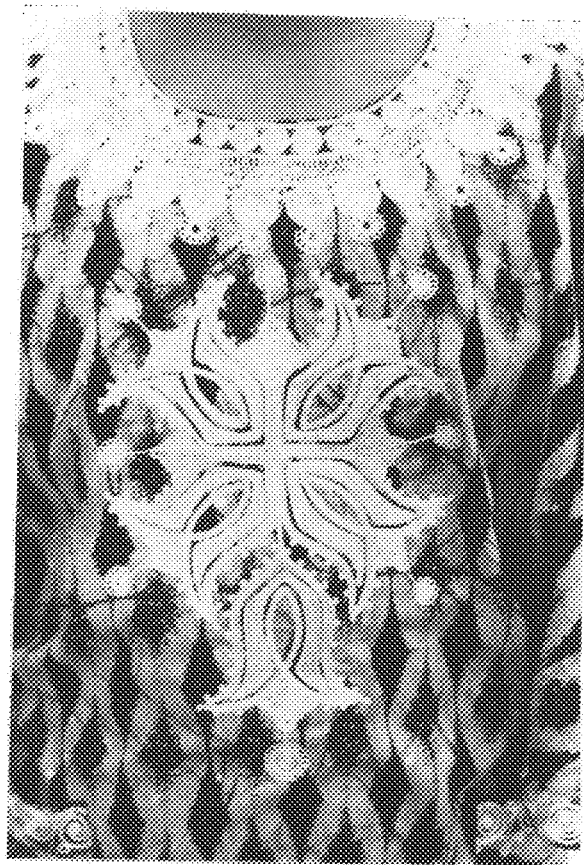


Figure 3

United Federal Republic of Nigeria. Design on shirt.

Today the traditional Nupe artist working with Nupe designs can make art a living force in the society. Creating new designs to mark important events in the history of the Nation is one of the goals of the artist. Therefore, recent events like Nigerian Independence Day or republic celebrations are depicted in various elaborate designs. Similar ideology has been used in factory produced materials on clothes to create specific prints which deal with events such as FESTAC 77, the death of Nigerian Military Regime Leader, Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces, the late Head of State, General Murtala Ramat Mohammed, or the crowning of Emirs and Chiefs. The use of these designs are seen on the type of clothes, shirt, embroidery used by Nigerian society. An example of such a design is seen in Figure 3, which represents the United Federation of Nigeria.

I am enticed to this creative art innovative use of traditional Nupe designs to convey contemporary messages. To relate these ideas the traditional artist uses abstract designs, mixing various color and design elements to document happenings. This ideology interested me so much that I began to incorporate Nupe design and literature to form my imagery in ceramics.

To this end, it is my interest that the viewer enjoy my puzzle by learning to understand the literature and representation that relates to my ceramics. Each piece is given a title; this engages the viewer in a mental exercise. Thereby, the society's members will participate in developing a more conscious feeling

for the beauty surrounding its environment and happenings.

What I would like to do next is to discuss three pieces of my ceramics which illustrate how Nupe symbolism based on gacin and gamaga functions in my art. I will discuss the symbolism represented in The Pregnant Woman "Ewanci", African Religious Symbol, and Wall or Fence Kparasho-Ku.

My first approach was to depict familiar objects in my surroundings. This led me to the question of the origin of life. I did a series of shapes based on the man and woman. The Pregnant woman "Ewanci" is the result of a subconscious feeling which I have for women who become curiosity objects while pregnant.

The society is made up of a large number of pregnant women. They are bearers of God's creation (new life, young life). Among the Nupes, pregnant women are treated with as much care and respect as royalty. Blissful stories, folktales and wise sayings connected with pregnancy predominate in the Nupe literature.

During the period of pregnancy the woman is highly respected. To some extent, among the traditional religious institutions she is adored as one of the gods. The society and the woman have to observe several actions and behaviours which can be a taboo to the young life.

The pregnant woman cannot go to the river bank at mid-day or night, rest under the shadow of certain trees, carry heavy loads, or even eat some types of seeds or fruits. There are several side effects that will befall the child of a woman who does not keep

the cultural beliefs of the society. So also the general public must not act certain ways around pregnant woman: actions like walking across the legs of pregnant women, walking behind or engaging in a quarrel or strife of any kind. This too has its side effects.

Therefore, any woman with protruding belly suggests intensive care and protection. Often the elderly would chant spiritual incantation, proverbial praise and prayers at the sight of any pregnant woman.

This intensive care and special treatment and privileges enjoyed by pregnant women suggested to me the idea of the abstract image of "Ewanci" "The Pregnant Woman." I blended the concepts of pregnancy with the imagination of the public in one abstract unit to represent a puzzle, Figure 4.

The sculpture pregnant women is a very interesting shape. It is made up of three clay slab pieces twisted and shaped into a masked image. This is made possible by the easy manipulation of the organic nature of clay. In order to give the sculpture that divine connotation and feeling of the Nupe's concept, I applied non clay materials such as fur, leather, and yarn to the fired clay piece.

Each of these mixed-media materials creates a feeling of human personality. One is attracted to feeling and touching the sculptures because the materials are part of the society. By using familiar everyday objects used by the society, I was able to draw the viewer's attention to the sensitive nature of pregnancy.



Figure 4

The Pregnant Woman "Ewanci"

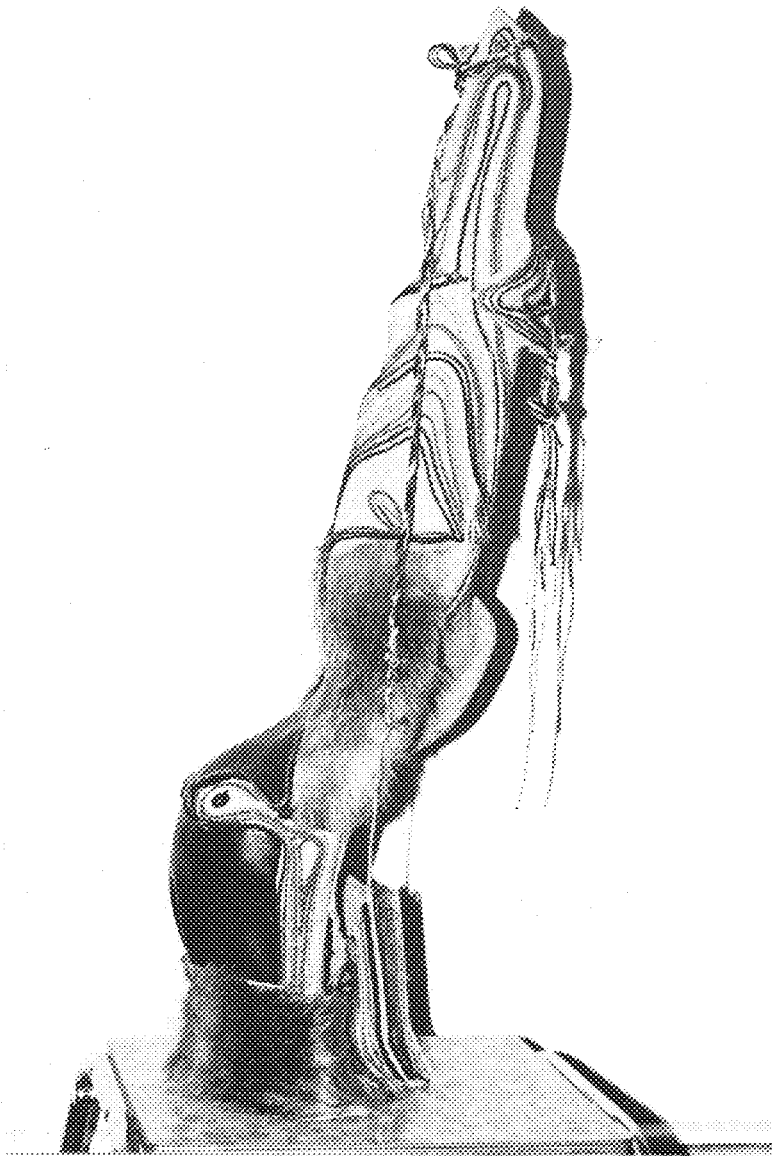


Figure 4

The Pregnant Woman "Ewanci"

One interesting abstraction is the way I depict the impressions of the general public concern for pregnant women. The use of different colors of yarn in circular forms on the abdomen is the artist idea of people's impression looking at the delicacy of pregnancy.

The sculpture "the pregnant woman" is mystified. The image looks more of a mask than a complete sculptural representation of an ideology. This idea of embellishing a symbolic mythology, as in traditional African Art, suggests the function and status of masks in traditional institutions. Mask elements are symbols of protection against evil and to some extent attain magical powers. By using such philosophy the image "Ewanci" the pregnant woman will guide the safety of the baby in the womb.

African Religious Symbol Gunuko

This sculpture piece, Figure 5, is a link between traditional concept and oral literature. Gunuko cult is associated with the god of peace. The people who observe the worship of this cult celebrate the festival of Ndakogbaya. The Ndakogbaya festival lasts a period of eight days. This festival comes at the end of the harvest time, during the dry season in Nigeria around the month of December. This festival is observed in order to cleanse the society of all the evils, witchcraft and all its associates.

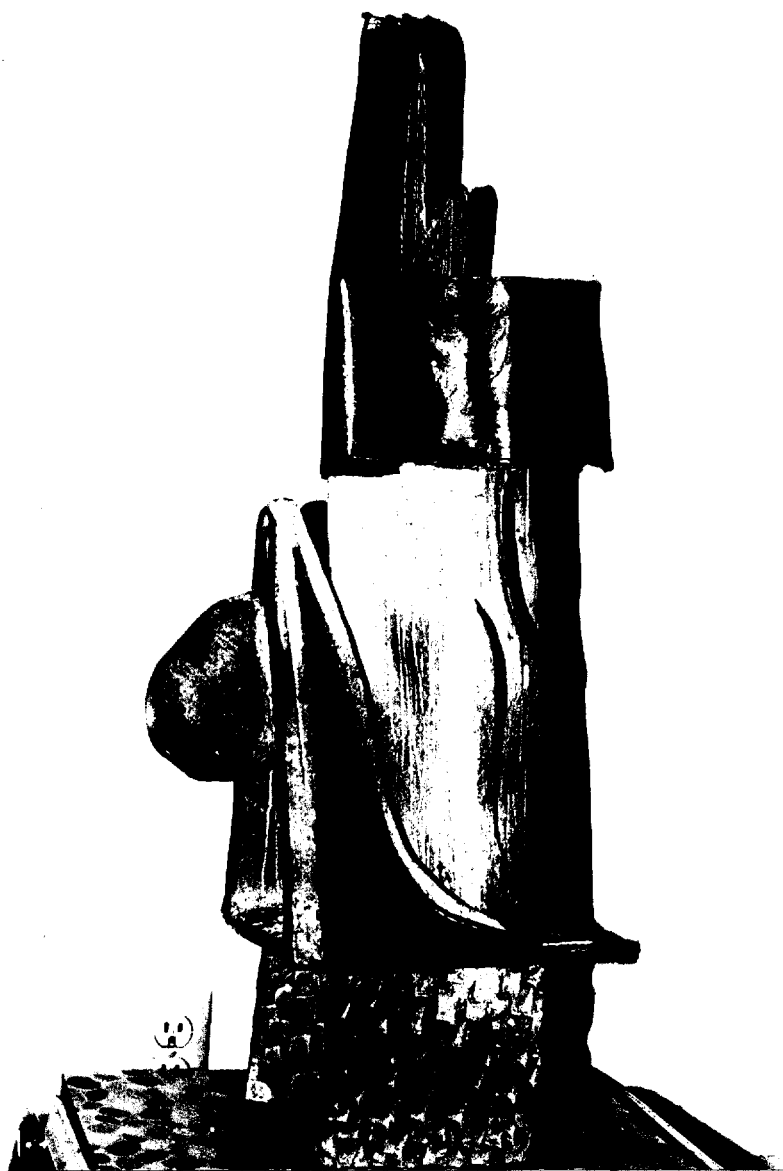


Figure 5

African Religious Symbol. Gunuko

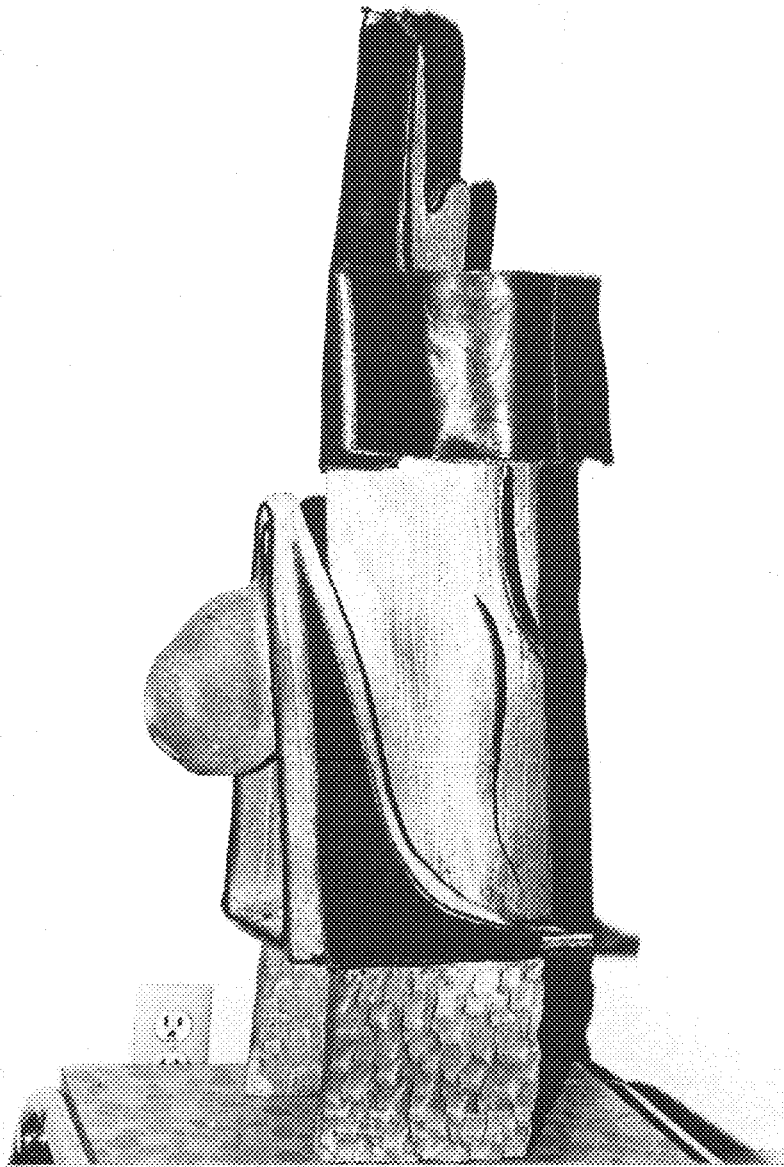


Figure 5

African Religious Symbol. Gunuko

The masquerade which appears during this celebration is said to be the visitation of the society's forefathers. The spiritual Masquerade of Ndakogboya is a vital as well as divine masquerade. The leader of the group is crowned with the title of Majin, "The chief". All the other masqueraders are referred to as Gunuko, an honorary name used as a sign of respect.

These and central masqueraders wear clothes in robes, long hand woven clothes, beautifully decorated. The size of these robes varies in length from six to thirty feet. The masqueraders are known for their capability of performing many magical displays at night. They rarely exhibit such skills in daylight for fear of taboos that have to do with losing some of their powers and secrets necessary to public performance. As a link with the ancestral homes, the attendants chant some spiritual incantations and proverbial praise "names" to prompt the masquerade into consciousness.

Gunuko as a word became an inspiration for symbolizing African religions because of its uniqueness. My interest was in unifying the traditional religions with the two foreign religions which have dramatically influenced and changed the African religions.

A particular architectural form is associated with each of the religions. For example it is easy to recognize Islamic mosques, Christian churches and "Enya woba" traditional institution house of worship or alter, because of their characteristic forms. Now, what I am attempting to do is to unite these religions in one form through my sculpture Gunuko. This I do by combining or drawing

from forms associated with each of the religions .

The geometric shapes such as the moon crest characterize Islamic sign, while the vertical and horizontal movements of the leather represent Christianity's cross, and the protruding organic form which is surrounded by a triangle and outlined in yarn, carries the traditional gourd often employed in rituals. The mixture of clay, leather and yarn quietly provides a reflection of a spiritual image a result of foreign influence assimilated by contemporary Nigerian Artists.

Kparashoku - Wall - Fence

This is one of my favourite pieces of sculpture. The idea behind it, too, has much to do with the way I conceive the society. The root of the image Kparashoku came from a proverb in Nupe which states that "Kparashoku wun da eye wun ma da zuman o." (The Wall can see and look alike from either side.) This double faced object is also a symbolic connotation of artificial barriers or falsehoods.

The common usage of Kparashoku is a foul language. No traditional artist will use the concept in any design elements. Because the traditional arts do not ordinarily draw specifics from literature, their ideas and designs are to appease or pacify their customer.

At this point, I am stretching beyond abstract representation to a more philosophical concept of the inner feeling. When you examine the proverb carefully, the object Kparashoku which signifies



Figure 6

Kparashoku Wall - Fence

a fence or wall is actually a piece of stick that peers through the wall and can be seen on either side. It is used to fasten grass thatch to the walls or mud-brick fences.

Fences are used to separate compounds; when the grass thatch "Tswota" is worn out the stick Kparashoku remains in place. It is regarded as an object of double interest because it is durable and because it outgrows its usefulness. When people are called Kparashoku, they have outgrown their usefulness and are referred to as persons of dubious character.

The concept Kparashoku implies an impression of deceit, which to me is the reason some people accept propaganda and misconceptions without reasoning. To me this is like a wall or a fence. If one can examine the barriers or misconceptions one is better able to understand one's society. Although I constructed the image for aesthetic enjoyment, I am also interested in how it can serve as a focus in examining the sources of barriers.

Is it a wall to you? What type of Wall or Fence? Cultural, social, political, ethnic, artificial, color, race, creed?

I want you to think of wall in terms of borders, boundaries or, all that is associated with "differences". Then begin to imagine this concept now as a new word which sees wall-fence as beautiful, a support and/or shelter. When you arrive at a point, re-evaluate yourself and see if one can find aesthetics and expressiveness in everything.

The sculpture Kparashoku is symmetrical and hopefully aesthetically pleasing. In making the form, I introduce this concept by using the neck of a gourd. To some people it enhances the sculpture, to others it detracts from it. This is my idea of Kparasoku. It should be an open door to stimulating an examination of society's barriers. By breaking this artificial wall the society can transform peoples' attitudes to heroic, intelligent, and happy lives.

What I have attempted to do then is to integrate elements of traditional Nupe society with my ceramics in an attempt to support my thesis that gacin and gamaga Nupe proverbs, wise sayings or allegories help to make art a living force in the society.

In conclusion, the idea of merging traditional Nupe designs and my ceramic art with particular ideology in the Nupe literature gacin and gamaga shows how a contemporary African Artist is trying to regain the respect of art as it had functioned socially in the past. I hope future studies in the lost culture of the traditional African Artist will develop a new atmosphere for Art in Africa and the world as a whole.

Including the three pieces of my work which I have discussed, my other works resulting from this approach include the following list of pieces:

1. The Pregnant Woman
Ewanci
2. African Religions Symbol
Gunuko
3. Kpandagi
Elegance
4. Egimayiwo
Mother and Child
5. Dogari-gitsu
Royal-police
6. Babo Tanzali
Antimony Cosmetic Bottle
7. Sagi
Queen; Female Sovereignty
8. Edo "Eye Gwani"
One eyed Man (Granary)
9. Nladeza Katako
Caricature of a woman
10. Kparashoku
Wall-Fence
11. Enya Dukun
Pot drum
12. Esi
Stone Game like drafts
13. Edukuku
Giragi kan; gifinio le efinio.
Egomania.
14. Doko yawo gi
Ceremonial Horse
15. Kwanazi
Advertisement-Sign

Slides of these works are available in the Art Education Office,
Art Department.

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